

War Machine

by

Ben Slythe

Smith looked across the table at Jones. It was a real pleasure to see daylight after the months of tension, lurking in a bunker. "So after all that we didn't fight at all."

Jones smiled, "It all seems so clear now, we really didn't have any need to fight. We simply coaxed each other to the edge."

"They seemed so implacable at the start, war seemed so certain."

Jones quietly drank for a moment, "Not them at all, of course. They had their war machine."

"So did we, ours came first."

"It was a clever idea, I'll grant you, a machine clever enough to negotiate on behalf of people, a thinking advocate with no grudges or aggression." Jones looked into the distance.

"Pity it didn't work."

"But it did work, we have peace," Smith looked confused.

"Peace after months of terror, you see there was a flaw in the plan, a serious flaw." Smith still looked baffled so Jones went on. "The machines had to be told what stance to adopt. People saw them as magical, they could be told what your demands were and they'd find a way to achieve them. But fundamentally if the two sets of demands overlapped then the machines were always going to raise the stakes. Nobody is going to intentionally adopt a weak strategy, it's always been fear that kept us from wars."

"But it wasn't the machines that failed, it was the people. People were needed to send the messages from our bunker to theirs. People must have altered the signals." Smith looked resolute.

Jones laughed, "You and I were responsible for our messages, did we alter any?"

"No, of course not, but they.."

"Are no more stupid than us." Jones interrupted.

"But as soon as the two machines were connected together directly they negotiated peace, doesn't that prove it. I mean, here we are, sitting in the sun on the exact spot the truce was negotiated. A great place, people will come from miles around to see it."

"I encouraged that meeting if you remember, I do know it's significance."

Smith was getting into his stride, "And you argued that the people were the weak link in the chain, their people."

"I lied."

Smith was shocked. "With the fate of the world in the balance, you lied?"

"I had to tell them something they'd believe. I had to arrange this meeting, and it had to be here."

Smith nodded, "The exact middle."

"Another fiction, I'm afraid, they could just as easily sent a couple of men with one of their war machines to our bunker, or vice versa."

"This is ridiculous, Jones, why would you lie about this?"

"Because, I finally realised what you haven't grasped yet, I worked out why the war was inevitable, and I wanted peace."

"I refuse to listen to this anymore, you can't take credit for stopping this war single handed."

Smith stood.

"Obviously not, not openly, but you ought to know the truth at least."

Smith paused in the act of leaving, "So what is this great secret, quickly, I'm getting bored of this fencing."

"The machines got to communicate outside."

"That's it!" Smith started to walk.

"The first modern general who needed to talk war at ground zero, up until then, if war came, the war machines would be safe. They were hidden in bunkers, now they were in the open. These are intelligent machines, you should know, you designed ours."

Smith slowly turned. "Blatant self-preservation, from a machine." He walked over to where Jones sat. "If I may, I'll shake your hand Jones." They shook. "I'll never forget what you did, thank you."

"You're welcome, pass the wine."

Smith started to laugh, for the first time in months he roared with laughter.